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## Duality of Middle Class Urban Women: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror and That Long Silence*

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### **Abstract:**

Standing at the threshold of modernity in the nineteen eighties, India was still a country struggling in and with the duality of the “traditional-modern”. Shashi Deshpande tries to capture in her characters this schizophrenic duality that the country was embroiled in. She explores the existential crisis faced by Indian women who are caught in the web of a post independent society, which is fast shifting from the traditional to the modern. This paper, therefore, seeks to study Deshpande’s women protagonists as portrayed in her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*. The anxiety and anguish of the “new” woman caught in “traditionality” needs to be explored. Where will the woman place herself in these ever-shifting paradigms of the “good” woman?

**Keywords: Tradition, modernity, existence, patriarchy, duality, new woman.**

In a literary career spanning more than two decades, Shashi Deshpande has time and again tried to explore the existential crisis faced by Indian women who are caught in the web of a post independent society, which is fast shifting from the traditional to the modern. The writer's major preoccupation has been to present the experience of a typical, urban educated middle class woman's life, who needs to find herself or so to say create a space for herself in this extremely transitional and changing world, where priorities also change rapidly.

Although Deshpande detests being called a feminist author or branded a “woman-writer”, there is no doubt in the fact that she interrogates important feminist issues of identity and individuality. After a reading of her interviews, it seems that Deshpande herself had been confused for many years whether she is a feminist or not. In her interview given to Lakshmi Holmstrom, she finally admits herself to be a feminist but only as a person and not as a novelist. Not as a novelist because there indeed is nothing dogmatic about her fiction. She simply portrays, in depth, the meaning of being an educated Indian woman in modern India still rooted in her traditions. This paper is therefore an attempt to study Shashi Deshpande's women protagonists as portrayed in her novels, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence*. It is an attempt to analyze the image of the urban woman she has tried to portray and how she brings out the tension that almost all women can identify with.

Since time immemorial, women are supposed only to be seen and not be heard. She is the

“grihalakshmi” (Goddess who makes the home) who is supposed to be an ideal daughter, wife and mother. Like a Sanskrit quotation translates, women needs protection from her father, then her husband and at last her son throughout her life. She is expected to always be ready to multi task and sacrifice for the family. The home and the world are divided into separate spaces. Women belong to the home while man deals with the world. Classic examples of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari are given to young girls to follow even today in the middle class family. Sita followed her husband into exile and went through the 'agnipariksha' (Trial through fire to prove one's chastity), Savitri brought back her husband from death and Gandhari pledged to lead the life of a blind to support her husband. But will these examples really work in the modern world? Can the urban educated women find happiness by following what these mythical women did? These are some of the major questions Deshpande has tried to decode in her novels.

Indian mindset was changing rapidly especially in the 1970s n 80s, that was the time when Deshpande wrote. With educational and career opportunities, the educated woman became aware of her rights and duties. Influence of western feminist movements, reforms and active women writings have been very effective in changing the attitude and perceptions of women; especially in knowing what they stand for and where they stand.

“The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with their tradition bound surrounding , resentment of the male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviors at home or place of work or in society all came up in a welter of projection” (Meena Shirwadker, qtd by Prasanna Sree, 9).

However, Indian women, even though educated, couldn't all of a sudden snap out of their cloister and immediately do away with what they had been taught since childhood, i.e. “placid stoicism”. The system has been so entrenched in them that the established cosy shell of patriarchy becomes an appealing option for women to easily slide into and be safely tucked away. Her women protagonists are, therefore, in a no man's land, neither fully in tradition nor in modernity. Thus they go through this conflicting pull and push at every turn. The search for an identity in this patriarchal world and liberation is what they seek. And yet they try to take shelter in this very patriarchal set up they resist. This is the major problem of all Deshpande heroines- they tend to fit into the system they resist and oppose and end up taking an escape route which, in reality, does not exist.

The novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* are very much like twin novels as they share the same anxiety and anguish and explore the search of the woman to fulfill herself as a human being. The overwhelming sense of disorientation and obsessive self denial and self punishment is very important in Deshpande's novels. The novels are similar to one another at the thematic level too. The basic theme and plot, in both the novels, concerns a woman caught in the circles of modern trends and traditional practices. Another common

factor observed in Deshpande's women is that they constantly require someone to shelter her—a father or a brother or most of the times a husband. They are constantly faced by a choice—whether to rebel against the injustice or maintain the unaltered peace by being silent, whether to listen to the calling of her modern intellect or to the emotions influenced largely by patriarchy. Her women, in the end, travel through the past, go through a cathartic experience and at last strive to have an equal and respectable place for them in the social order.

Both her novels *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *That Long Silence* depict the clash between responsibility to oneself and responsibility to the traditional role of an ideal woman. While *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is based on the problems faced by a well established career woman, a doctor called Sarita or also called Saru who earns more than her husband; *That Long Silence* projects a woman writer named Jaya who fears rejection and moral censorship from society, thus not being able to express herself freely as a writer. Though both Saru and Jaya are quite different from each other, they move from self renunciation to self realisation.

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* tells the story of Saru, successful professionally but unsuccessful in the domestic front. In the daytime she is a confident urban woman who cures people of their pain, but as darkness engulfs the world, she turns into a patient herself trapped in pain inflicted by her husband Manohar (also called Manu). The name Manu rings a bell. The name, according to Dr. S. Prasanna, carries overtones of the legendary patriarchal law giver who gave the world a male centered viewpoint. Here, the feminist attack by the woman author can't be denied.

What women generally tend to do is to seek an alternative to parental bondage and end up in a marriage that suffocates them. Saru does exactly this. Her choice of marrying Manu, a boy from a lower caste against the wishes of her mother becomes a sign of discarding the traditional values her mother holds on to. Here, her act of rebellion is temporary, only against her mother because she still retains her middle class mentality and dreams of total submission to her “Shelley”, the macho figure she imagined Manu to be, like all other ordinary girls.

Manu earlier had no qualms in treating Saru as his equal, as a person as then he was the bread earner of the family. Peace disintegrates once Saru starts to succeed, leaving him far behind.

“How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?”— A query by an interviewer shatters Manu who can't bear the slap on his face. It becomes the turning point. Sex or rather marital rape becomes the only way of asserting his power, of reminding her that he is still the man. Manu's act is unjustified but this doesn't mean Manu is to be blamed entirely. Valorization of Saru's problem is something that Deshpande strictly dissuades herself from doing. The character of Saru is equally troublesome. At some points in the novel it becomes very difficult to understand her. She is the ‘urban educated woman’ but

just to bring peace in her life she is more than willing to do away with her profession as a doctor and settle down as Manu's housewife just like her mother. What baffles the reader is that Saru feels the women in the past had easier lives as they didn't have to struggle between a career and a home. How can she, the strong willed girl who fought with her mother to learn medicine, be so easy-going when it comes to leaving her profession! This shows the dilemma of being a pseudo-modern woman.

This conflict of being both in tradition and modernity is further seen in Saru when she accuses Manu of not objecting to her proximity to Boozie , a man she is close to and who helps her financially. She wants Manu to question her, restrict her. She wants Manu to act like a typical male chauvinist pig and when he doesn't, Saru is left disappointed. If Saru is a modern confident woman with an identity of her own, she should not need anybody to question her friendship with anybody. It shows her weakness.

Saru hates her husband Manu for various reasons, particularly for his beastly nature in bed but she doesn't do anything to stop it. She doesn't even care to talk to Manu and instead runs away to her parental home, calling Manu "schizophrenic", thus giving him good reason to escape. Saru's speech for the women's college and her fervent advocacy of women's inferior position further shows her inability to adapt to the modern views of the time.

"A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband...that's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage...Women's Magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That's nonsense. Rubbish." (137)

The entire novel therefore raises several questions regarding patriarchy. Deshpande however does not glorify women as a martyr or a prey in the hands of men. In fact the novel puts up questions "Who is the victim and who is the predator? Can we blame the husband completely for the mess?". Even the urban man's tragic loneliness has been dealt with marginally, if not fully, by the writer.

You realize the dark holds no terror only when you venture into the dark. Saru has long been escaping and delaying confrontation. In the end, she realizes she is as much responsible for the complex situation created. The problem doesn't lie only in Manu, her mother or Renu but it's within her.

"Baba, if manu comes, tell him to wait"(221)

The call of her professional duty and she deciding to speak to Manu proves that she has stepped from darkness to light; she is no longer caught in the duality of the traditional and the modern.

Situated in a completely different scenario, Jaya, the protagonist of *That Long Silence* is an educated woman writer who is torn between self expression and the traditional social stigmas that come with being a woman writer. It seems like what Sarita had said in the Women College in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is being followed by Jaya in *That Long Silence*, i.e. to walk two steps behind the husband. Jaya has been influenced by the modern thought of the west and is herself a promising writer but she still compares her with the image of Sita who follows “purushottam-ram” unquestioningly.

She, in trying to please Mohan, ends up losing her own individuality so much so that she is given a new name “Suhasini” which means “soft smiling motherly woman”. Jaya’s mistake is that she equates peace to silence, not realizing that there is volcano suppressed inside her which may erupt anytime.

When Mohan loses his job, both shift to a small Dadar apartment and it is here that Jaya realizes she has no identity of her own; not only as a writer but also as a person. She sees herself and Mohan as a “pair of bullocks yoked together”. She could have taken a divorce and freed herself but she can’t, does not want to. ‘Marriages are made in Heaven’, it can’t end. She is not modern enough to break it. The maxim of “pati-parmeshwar” (Husband-devoting wife) still appeals to her somehow. Jaya has literally metamorphosed into Suhasini, the stereotype.

A writer tries never to compromise with his/her creativity and freedom. Well! Since our protagonist is a woman and that too an Indian woman, she compromises even in her writing. She writes a column ‘Seeta’ for a magazine because her husband approves of it and not because she wants to. Her writing doesn’t reflect the ideas of an educated intellectual ‘Jaya’ but that of a stupid middleclass housewife and her travails.

Jaya’s condition can be related to Virginia Woolf’s short story “*Shakespeare’s sister*” where a woman is not allowed self expression as an artist. Unlike Judith, the imaginary sister of Shakespeare who had no support, Jaya was taught to lead a victorious life like a modern woman by her father. Jaya deliberately loses herself after marriage. Cutting her hair and wearing dark glasses to suit Mohan’s idea of a modern woman doesn’t make her modern rather taking an initiative would have. Here, one needs to recall ‘Aila’ in Nadine Gordimer’s novel *My Son’s Story* who also cuts her hair and changes her attire. There she is asserting her independence, here Jaya is negating it.

There comes a situation in Jaya’s life when she aborts her third pregnancy. It was her choice but she feels guilty and sad, thus weakening her image of a modern woman. The dissatisfaction in her marriage and profession crushes Jaya steadily. The conflict between traditional and modern mindset can again be seen in Jaya’s friendship with Kamat who

understands her best.

“With this man I had not been a woman. I had been myself- Jaya” (153)

However, she fails in this relationship too. The desertion of the dying Kamat by Jaya is an indication of her pathetic mindset, her fear of what the society may think of makes her flee like a coward. Jaya gets scared of failing in her only career, i.e her marriage.

Jaya’s dilemma is rightly stated in Shakuntala Bharvani’s words, “The women of today, therefore, speaking in the language of psychology, have a near schizophrenic personality; one side steadily accepts while the other craves to think.”

In the end, Jaya, just like Saru, emerges as a new woman after a lot of self analysis. She is ready to accept tradition but not at the cost of her individuality. Women can’t negate the Indian culture of security through marriage and family but she also can’t negate the self. The story of Saru and Jaya show us how women are not always the prisoners of patriarchy. They are sometimes victims by choice. Mohan Rakesh’s play *Halfway House* serves a good example to highlight the positivity that exists in Deshpande’s ending. Unlike Rakesh’s characters Savitri and Mahendranath who go a full circle to come back to the same old pessimistic situation, Deshpande presents an enlightened character. Like Anita Desai, Ismat Chughtai and Nayantara Sehgal, Deshpande succeeds in not only giving a true picture of the isolation and insecurity of women but also in understanding them psychologically and giving them hope. The quotation from Dhammapada and the epigram prefacing *The Dark Holds No Terrors-*

“You are your own refuge.  
There is no other refuge

This refuge is hard to achieve”- is exactly what Deshpande wants women to understand. It is in their own hands to fight oppression and safeguard their individuality. If they don’t find a way out, nobody else would. If urban educated women are caught in concentric circles of tradition and modernity, they also have better chances of coming out of it. Saru and Jaya understand this and succeed in restoring their self respect. For both, the voyage of self discovery becomes complete.

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